Not on the Reading List

BOOKS TO FALL IN LOVE WITH

What are the best books you've read? No: what are your *favourite* books? Which books have meant the most to you, and what are the ones you really want all your friends to read as well?

Paul Farrington-Douglas (UK)

The books that mean most to us are not always the ones that we would say are "the best". Most of us think of "books we love" and "great books" as different categories. But why?

The Lies We Tell

Did you know that people often lie about what books they've read? And not just to teachers, but even to friends. In fact, research shows that most people have lied about having read particular books. What happens when they get asked about something in a book they haven't read? Embarrassment? Nope. They keep pretending. One of the most popular tricks is to say, "Oh, it was so long ago, I can hardly remember it."

This shows how we think of reading as something we "should" do, and how we judge each other (or at least think that others judge us) by what we read.

The top books that people lie about include works by Charles Dickens and Tolstoy as well as modern classics like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and George Orwell's *1984*. These are all great books. (And may I say here I *have* read them all, but it was so long ago I can't remember much about them.)

You'll find these books on many reading lists. Such lists are created to help us read more widely, which is a good aim. As *Game of Thrones* author George R.R. Martin put it, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The person who never reads lives only one." But why do so many lists contain the same few books?

Five Million Lives

Erik Fredner, a researcher at Stanford University in the US, tried to find out roughly how many books of fiction there are in English. He says a good guess is around five million. That means there are a *lot* of possible lives to live!

Let's say you read a book a day, starting in your teens. By your death, you'd be the best-read human in history – and you might have read less than 0.5% of the fiction available in English. You could *still* be lying about having read Homer, Dickens and Tolstoy.

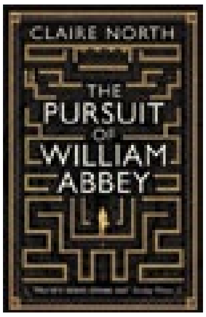
NOT EVERYONE'S SHORTLIST

Fredner says that a well-read literary critic might know 200 or so books well. Several books will be common to almost *all* those critics, and those are often the ones that reach the reading lists at school. As a result, lists intended to broaden our reading are mostly chosen by people with very similar educations.

We've made a different reading list. We reached out to our writers, friends and others to ask not for the books they think we all "should" read but for books that made them go, "OMG! Wow!"

Here are some of the picks of what we received.

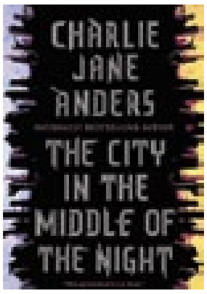
The Pursuit of William Abbey by Claire North



A weird side effect of the covid-19 lockdown was that I stopped reading for about six weeks – and it was this book that got me back into reading again. A man is followed by the shadow of a murdered boy who reveals the truth of people's hearts whenever he comes close to them. It is a great story and has great characters, which is just what I want these days.

Recommended by Moose Allain (UK), artist, illustrator and cartoonist

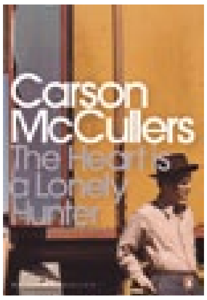
The City in the Middle of the Night by Charlie Jane Anders



"If you control our sleep, then you can own our dreams... And from there, it's easy to control our entire lives." A science fiction novel with ideas, strong writing and a young protagonist, written by an award-winning new writer.

Recommended by Adrian Tchaikovsky (UK), author, Shadows of the Apt series

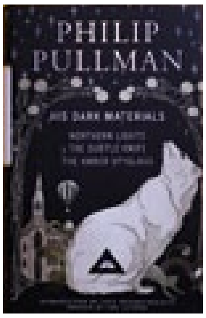
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers



A (relatively) forgotten treasure of a book, with crystal-clear prose and universal themes. Written when the author was only 23, it is about a deaf man named John Singer and the people he meets in a 1930s industrial town in the US state of Georgia. It's about loneliness, connection and growing up.

Recommended by Paul A. Davies (UK), English textbook author

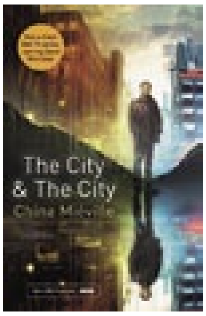
His Dark Materials trilogy by Phillip Pullman



I'm not normally a fan of fantasy books but these captivated me (= held my attention) from the first page. The main character Lyra is brilliant and the whole story is rich and imaginative.

Recommended by Jackie Fox (NZ), Bridge writer

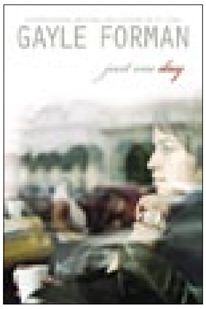
The City and The City by China Miéville



The City and the City is a detective story, but as it is by "weird fiction" master China Miéville, there is a twist (= something unusual): the crime takes place in two different cities that occupy the same space. Residents of Besźel and Ul Qoma live in the same place, but have to learn to "unsee" anything from the other city. For Detective Borlú, that becomes harder and harder to do...

Recommended by Liam Peach (UK), Gate deputy editor and writer

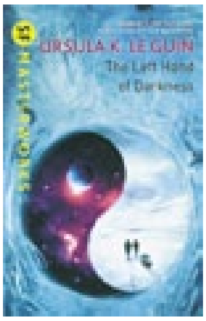
Just One Day by Gayle Forman



An American student meets a young Dutch guy in England. Their light-hearted story mixes travel, Shakespeare, and romance across Europe (and begins a trilogy if you like it).

Recommended by Auburn Scallon (USA), Bridge writer

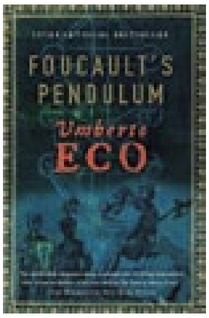
The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula Le Guin



This book, one of the classics of science fiction, is about the meeting between people from two different planets – Terra and Winter – who are different both physically and culturally. In learning to communicate, each is forced to question things they thought to be true, including about themselves. It will make you think about your own identity and look at those around you in a new way

Recommended by Megan LeBoeuf (USA), Ready deputy editor and writer

Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco



Some bored historians get interested in silly conspiracy theories and decide to prove they can come up with something much more convincing (= believable). What starts as a fun game turns serious when some very scary people start to think it's all true. It's funny and very clever – and even though it was written long before the internet, it's relevant to the age of fake news.

Recommended by Paul Farrington-Douglas (UK), Bridge deputy editor and writer